

JASON AND THE ARGONAUTS THROUGH THE AGES



JASON
COLAVITO

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rather simplified story, though the score by Carlo Rustichelli is considered one of the composer's best.

Of course, the best known and for most the definitive screen version of the Jason myth was the 1963 Hollywood sword-and-sandals epic *Jason and the Argonauts*, directed by Don Chaffey and featuring the timeless stop-motion special effects of the legendary Ray Harryhausen, who later wrote that of all his movies this was the film that most pleased him. The \$3 million movie's advertising proclaimed it "The epic story that was destined to stand as a colossus of adventure!" Harryhausen was the major creative force behind the film, and he settled on the Jason story only after considering and rejecting a Perseus story (eventually to become *Clash of the Titans* in 1981), and a picture where Jason teamed up with the Arabian mythological figure Sinbad. The movie was filmed on location in southern Italy in 1961 after Harryhausen determined that Greece was too gray and bleak to effectively portray Greece on screen.⁴⁵

In a very broad fashion the film follows the outlines of Apollonius' *Argonautica*, though with some notable differences. To provide a happy ending, the film ends with Jason and Medea sailing away from Colchis as happy lovers. As a result, adventures from the homeward journey, such as the battle with Talos, the man of bronze, are transposed to the outward journey because they make for visually interesting set pieces. Harryhausen was well aware that he was revising the myth, and in fact he began by organizing the various monsters and special effects shots in a compelling cinematic order before writing a story to link them together.⁴⁶ Oddly enough, in this Harryhausen revived the practice of the ancient poets, who freely revised and reconfigured sections of the Jason epic to suit their purposes and audiences.

In the revised version of the movie, the talking oak plank of Zeus from Dodona has become a magical figurehead of Hera who speaks to Jason (Todd Armstrong), and Jason even appears on Mt. Olympus to address the gods. Zeus (Niall MacGinnis) and Hera (Honor Blackman) use Jason as a piece on a giant game board, and Zeus has restricted Hera to aid the hero but five times. Talos becomes not the last of the race of bronze, but instead a

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statue forged by Hephaestus to guard the treasure of the gods. He comes to life when Hylas and Hercules steal into the treasure chamber built into the base of Talos' statue, and this episode serves to remove Hercules from the mission. While traditionally the *Argo* sailed through the Symplegades by watching a dove, in the movie gigantic Triton, son of Poseidon, rises from the sea to hold apart the rocks—not unlike Athena, who did so invisibly, in Apollonius. At Colchis, events play out somewhat differently than in the classical versions of the myth. Aeëtes imprisons the Argonauts, and only through the aid of Medea (Nancy Kovack) are they clandestinely released. The challenges of Aeëtes are eliminated, and Jason proceeds directly to the Fleece, where he kills not a serpent but the seven-headed serpentine Hydra borrowed from the myth of Heracles.

Aeëtes then tries to stop Jason's escape by planting the teeth of the Hydra (*pace*, Cadmus), which calls up from the ground seven armed skeletons (one for each of Hydra's heads) who do battle with Jason and the handful of Argonauts who had accompanied him inland. This famous four-minute sequence took four and a half months to animate and required careful planning to align the skeletons' movements perfectly with the filmed swordplay of the human actors. Though the image of Jason doing battle with the skeletons is striking, it was apparently based on a misunderstanding of the concept of the earth-born men. Harryhausen wrongly believed that "in the legend it is rotting corpses" who rise from the ground, but he worried zombie warriors would earn the film a rating that would prevent children from attending.⁴⁷ The Spartoi of legend, of course, were not rotting zombies but living humans born from the womb of earth. The skeleton warriors of the film kill all the assembled Argonauts save Jason, who leaps from a cliff to reach the *Argo* and the Argonauts who stayed behind. Together with the Fleece and Medea, his great love, Jason sails for home, happy ending assured.

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The 1963 production of *Jason and the Argonauts* has defined the popular understanding of the Jason myth despite its many departures from Classical sources. No single change has had more of an impact than Ray Harryhausen's mistaken interpretation of the Spartoi as reanimated corpses, which he translated into the famous skeleton warriors, seen here battling Jason (Todd Armstrong). The magnificent animation work, visible even in the lifelike poses in this still, has made these skeletons into a symbol of the Jason myth as a whole.

Perhaps the clearest indication of the overwhelming success of this lively and entertaining movie is the very fact that the myth of Jason forever after became known as "Jason and the Argonauts" in place of its ancient title, the *Argonautica*. There is no greater testament to the enduring influence of the 1963 movie than the adoption of its title as a synonym for the myth as a whole. Critics at the time, however, had a low opinion of the movie. *Time* complained that the producers added elements foreign to the myth such as Talos (they were, of course, wrong on that count): "The straight story of

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Jason's exploits, told with magic and imagination and a minimum of studio trickery, might have been delightful. This version is more bull than Bulfinch.⁴⁸ Harold Thompson, writing in the *New York Times*, called the movie an "absurd, unwieldy adventure—if that's the word" and thought the climactic battle with the skeleton men was a "comic interlude." He also complained that neither Jason nor Medea undressed, and that Todd Armstrong was "spindly" compared to other "beefcake" actors.⁴⁹ It would only be much later, when the children who watched the movie grew up and began to celebrate the touchstones of their childhood, that the movie would be ranked a classic.

A new version of *Jason and the Argonauts* was broadcasted on NBC in the United States as a two-part miniseries in May 2000, starring Jason London as the title character. It hewed more closely to the *Argonautica* than the 1963 film, and was twice the length. To pad the time, the movie followed Jason after the achievement of the Fleece, which he won by, essentially, hurling the dragon off the side of a cliff. He, Medea, and the Argonauts voyage homeward, and the love of Jason and Medea withstands both Atalanta's confession of love for Jason and Zeus's attempts to seduce (!) Medea. The evil Pelias is killed, and Jason and Medea reign happily as the rightful monarchs of Iolcus. Like its predecessor, the TV movie earned mostly poor reviews. In 2008 NBC planned a prime-time drama called *The Argonauts* about contemporary treasure hunters propelled back in time to the age of Jason, to be filmed in the green-screen style of the then-recent Spartan-themed movie *300*. The program was never produced. However, in 2013 the BBC made Jason the star of his own fantasy-adventure series, albeit one heavily reimagined. *Atlantis* cast Jason (Jack Donnelly) as a new arrival in a parallel-universe version of the doomed city and the protagonist exploring a wealth of Greek myths in a fantasy land that is a hodgepodge of Minoan, Greek, and Persian elements. This Jason, who seems to have traveled between our world and that of Atlantis, is initially of uncertain relationship to our Jason. If not exactly true to Apollonius, the series accidentally captured something of the myth's antecedents.

Versions of the tragedy of *Medea* were filmed more than a dozen times since